

WILDLIFE CARE FACILITIES

Volunteers Making a Difference for Injured and Orphaned Wildlife

It was the spring of 1978, and Tom and Cheryl Millham, owners of a marina in Lake Tahoe, were part of a group that decided local residents needed a place to take injured wild birds and animals. The South Lake Tahoe area is an eclectic mixture of virtually every wildlife species imaginable, and the Millhams had their hands full from day one.

Now, 21 years later, Lake Tahoe Wildlife Care, Inc. (LTWC) is still thriving under the Millhams' care, and last summer made headlines by rehabilitating a pair of baby river otters and constructing a specially made cage area for them. LTWC now sits on almost an acre of land at South Lake Tahoe, with five different permanent cages, an 80-by-30-foot flight area, a coyote pen, a fawn pen, and a river otter pen. In 1993, LTWC played host to the International Wildlife Rehabilitation Council's annual conference, which covered four days and over 40 topics for wildlife rehabilitation professionals.

Then there's Sue Howell's Wildlife Education Rehabilitation Center (WERC) in Morgan Hill, which has pioneered a method for rehabilitating young bobcats. Howell

and her volunteers will go to such extremes as to immerse themselves in costume and "the smells of nature" just to make sure these animals don't get too comfortable around humans.

Facilities like the ones operated by the Millhams and Howell continue to fill a huge need in California by helping humans coexist with nature. When someone finds an injured or sick wild animal, one of California's wildlife rehab centers is the place to go. There are approximately 200 wildlife rehabilitation facilities recognized by the Department of Fish and Game, located throughout California (see complete list on the following pages). The work they do with the thousands of volunteers they enlist, continues to amaze those who work closely with them.

"It's just mind-blowing what some of the care centers are willing to do," said Department of Fish and Game (DFG) Capt. Tom Belt. Belt's unit, in the Central Coast Region, coordinates, monitors and accredits rehabilitation programs. "They do DFG and the state a big service."

The wildlife care centers generally practice the "three Rs" while helping injured and sick wildlife — rescuing, rehabilitating and releasing back to nature. Each facility is composed of dedicated volunteers who may handle up to 100 distress calls per day during the peak spring and summer months. They deal with hundreds of native species; everything from robins to hawks, and raccoons to coyotes.

The facilities often work closely with their local communities, receiving referrals from police and sheriff dispatchers, animal control officers and veterinarians (in fact, many vets donate much-needed time caring for the animals). LTWC alone has taken care of more than 13,000 wildlife, with an eventual release rate of almost 67 percent.

"We credit this success to our training seminars, the positive outlook we have with our volunteers and the community, and the continuing education," Tom Millham said.

While WERC actually uses "education" in its name, the truth is most of the wildlife care centers rely heavily on educational programs to inform their communities when it is proper to seek help for an injured wild animal.

"They all work very hard to educate their communities," Capt. Belt said. "We've found that the rehab centers help us by involving more people, since it gives them an opportunity to enjoy wildlife in ways other than hunting and fishing. And they help the Department of Fish and Game with one of our tasks, which is helping care for wildlife."

Though handling mammals accounts for only about 1 percent of WERC's traffic, its reputation was built with bobcat care, Howell said. "Our goal is to not raise one that becomes friendly with humans; we want them to be fearful of humans," said Howell, who has operated WERC since 1990.

Howell has been raising a bobcat that came to WERC just hours old, the first time one that young has been raised by a wildlife care center. Usually they come in at eight or 10 weeks old, Howell said. To achieve the natural raising method, WERC volunteers immerse themselves in herbs and a full body costume, including face mask, before any interaction with the baby bobcat. The cat, which has been at WERC since mid-September 1998, was released in early June of 1999.

The Millhams, on the other hand, were asked to care for a sick baby female river otter in the summer of 1998 that was picked up by a boy in the Red Bluff area. The otter ended up at LTWC and since it is "sad" to raise only one by itself, Cheryl Millham said, a search was on to find another. No other rehab center in California had a river otter program, so the search was difficult. But a male was finally located at the Feather River Wildlife Center, and the two were raised together. They were both released to the wild last fall.

"Actually, most of the injured wildlife we get in here are birds, and songbirds account for about 85 percent," Cheryl Millham said. "Songbirds aren't a real 'glory' bird, but they are in trouble, and do need all the help they can get. A big problem is with cats. They do a tremendous amount of damage to wildlife."

What would California do without its wildlife rehabilitation care facilities? That's something thousands of injured animals each year don't want to find out.

What to do if you find injured wildlife

What should people do if they find an injured wild animal in California? Here are some tips from the experts:

- Don't feed it! You just might give it the wrong food, which could cause a weakened animal or bird to die.
- Keep it in a dark, quiet and warm place.
- Time is of the essence, so you should call your closest wildlife care center as soon as possible (a complete list is on the following pages). Once a call is made, the wildlife center will help you do the rest.
- Remember, it is illegal in California to keep wildlife for more than three days, so you'll have to act quickly. That's where the wildlife rehabilitation centers come in.
- Don't pick up deer fawns. The mother deer is probably nearby.



One of the baby river otters.